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Source: *Social Psychology Quarterly*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (Dec., 1994), pp. 300-312
Published by: American Sociological Association
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/2787157
Accessed: 10-12-2019 17:33 UTC

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Social Psychology Quarterly
1994, Vol. 57, No. 4, 300–312

Managing Emotions in Public: The Case of Wheelchair Users*

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The sociology of emotions has concentrated on individuals' socially guided management of their own emotions to the neglect of interpersonal processes of emotion management. This article suggests that the interpersonal management of emotions is socially ubiquitous and significant, and does so with the example of wheelchair users' distinctive public experiences. We draw on our own participant observation while using wheelchairs in public, on conversational interviews with wheelchair users, and on published autobiographical accounts. Our specific focus is the emotional challenges that wheelchair users face when in public and their consequent management of both their own and others' emotions. We conclude that wheelchair users pay for even limited public acceptance with considerable emotion work and micropolitical sacrifices. We also conclude that their experiences demonstrate the more generally emotional character of contemporary public life and the often interpersonal character of emotion management.

Since the 1970s, students of social life have learned many lessons about the social sources and consequences of emotions. Many of us now appreciate that social life is as much an affair of the heart as of the head, but perhaps we do not appreciate this fact deeply enough. We still tend to concentrate on individuals' socially guided management of their own emotions to the neglect of their management of one another's. Although there are notable exceptions (e.g., Clark 1990; Hardesty 1987), those exceptional examinations are limited to dramatic examples such as therapeutic encounters and angry confrontations between parents and adolescent children. We doubt, however, that the interpersonal management of emotions is limited to such highly charged social situations.

At least the study of contemporary public life suggests otherwise. As Goffman (1963a, 1971) demonstrates convincingly, individuals in public places attempt to assure one another of their civility and goodwill so as not to evoke embarrassment, fear, or anger in others or in themselves. Although they often appear emotionally reserved and indifferent, that appearance is a consequence of emotion work rather than of its absence. Students of social life have ignored this lesson far too long. The study of public life has much to teach us about the emotional dynamics of social interaction and life, if only we are willing to learn from those who notice what we usually miss. Also, in regard to the interpersonal management of emotions, those whose principal mode of mobility is a wheelchair cannot help noticing what the rest of us can overlook more easily.

Social life is at least as emotionally as physically challenging for wheelchair users. The vagaries of fate have left them in an emotionally vulnerable and volatile social position. Both "helping" professionals and caring acquaintances alternately encourage them to accept their disability and to rise above it, stirring conflicting feelings of shameful inadequacy and prideful self-confidence (Murphy 1987). Medical practitioners and social service providers commonly push them to unbearable pain, anger, and despair (Murphy 1987; Zola 1982). Lovers, friends, family members, and other caregivers often propel wild emotional swings between affectionate appreciation, guilt, resentment, and fear of abandonment (Callahan 1989; Fisher and Galler 1988; Murphy 1987).

The public lives of wheelchair users are no less stormy. More of them are making this discovery as they frequent public places more often than in the recent past, but students of social life have shown little interest in the

* This is a revised version of a paper presented at the 1993 annual meetings of the Midwest Sociological Society. We are grateful to the Keck Foundation for their financial support and to Ms. Teena Willard for her moral and logistical support of the research on which this paper is based. We are also indebted to Sherryl Kleinman, Donileen Loseke, and the anonymous reviewers for *SPQ* for their guidance and encouragement.

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lessons that wheelchair users are learning. Even the few students of social life who have paid some attention to wheelchair users' public experiences have lumped them with widely dissimilar categories of people under the general heading of the "stigmatized" (Gardner 1993; Goffman 1963b). Unquestionably there are revealing parallels between the public treatment of wheelchair users, persons with other disabilities, and those with otherwise "spoiled identities," but wheelchair users' distinctive experiences may be especially instructive. We explore that possibility here by focusing exclusively on wheelchair users' experiences in public places such as shopping malls, restaurants, grocery stores, and city sidewalks.

Our specific focus is the emotional dilemmas faced by wheelchair users when in public places. We begin by briefly describing the inspiration and empirical basis of our analysis. Then we examine three general types of emotional challenges that wheelchair users confront in public places. Our purpose is not only to provide some insight into wheelchair users' public lives but also to draw from their example more general lessons about the emotional dynamics of contemporary public life and the interpersonal dynamics of emotion management.

As others have argued convincingly (e.g., Karp, Stone, and Yoels 1991; Lofland 1989), the legacy of Simmel (1950:409–24) and Wirth (1938) has long blurred our vision of public life. Far too many students of social life have seen the outline of contemporary public life in their unflattering portrayals of urbanism, and have looked no further. Even critics of Simmel and Wirth, such as Claude Fischer (1981, 1982, 1984), uncritically accept that dim view. Although urbanites are demonstrably sociable in their private lives, Fischer blames their public reserve, indifference, and impersonality for perpetuating the impression of social estrangement and isolation that Simmel and Wirth fostered. Perhaps that is how strangers in public places appear, but, when it comes to public life, appearances are often deceiving.

This is one of the lessons taught by Goffman (1963a, 1971) and those whom he inspired and influenced. They remind us that below its apparently asocial surface, public behavior is thoroughly social and sociologically interesting (Lofland 1989).

> One can never see the social character of relations in an anonymous situation simply by describing what an anonymous situation "looks like." In other words, it is the very special characteristic of anonymity that it is the result of *a normatively guided social production* giving *the appearance of normlessness* and the absence of social character (Karp et al. 1991:103–104; authors' emphasis).

Yet even these perceptive students of public life have not explored its emotional depths. That is where the public experiences of wheelchair users lead—to the emotion management that gives public life its passionless appearance. Therein lies another lesson for students of social life: social shaping of emotions is as much an interpersonal and public process as it is personal and private. After briefly summarizing the emotional burden that wheelchair users bear when in public places, we conclude by discussing these more general lessons.

THE INSTRUCTION OF WHEELCHAIR USE AND USERS

Our collective interest in wheelchair users' public experiences grew out of conversations between the first author and second author, who has used an electrically powered wheelchair as her principal mode of public mobility. At the urging of the first author, she started to make fieldnotes of her daily participant observation of the social life of a wheelchair user. Those notes provided the basis for an earlier article (Eggleston 1992) and inspired a more extensive study of wheelchair users' experiences in public places.

While the second author continued to make notes of her public experiences, the first author supplemented these with fieldnotes that he made when using a wheelchair in public places for the specific purpose of participant observation. His experiences included short trips along city sidewalks, excursions to shopping malls, and a visit to a restaurant in the company of the second author and another regular wheelchair user. We also collected and read wheelchair users' autobiographical accounts including books (Callahan 1989; Murphy 1987), chapters in edited volumes and collections of essays (Brightman 1985; Campling 1981; Dubus 1991), and brief anecdotes published in magazines and reported in monographs (C.

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Davis 1987; Kleinfield 1977; Maloff and Wood 1988).

In addition, we collectively conducted and recorded interviews with seven women and five men who regularly use a wheelchair in public places.

Although admittedly this was a convenience sample, they were as diverse a group of wheelchair users as we could find. They ranged from 11 to 62 years of age, had been using a wheelchair for as little as three months or as long as 50 years, and had a variety of diagnosed medical conditions including cerebral palsy (2), multiple sclerosis (3), muscular dystrophy (1), traumatic brain injury (1), and paraplegia resulting from spinal injury (4) and viral infection (1). Five were employed in such varied jobs as college professor and stock clerk; the rest were currently unemployed, including a full-time student, two retired schoolteachers, and a retired store clerk.[1] Our conversations with them lasted from one and one-half to four hours and yielded 150 single-spaced pages of transcript.

We repeatedly reviewed and compared information from these varied materials, both during and after collection. Although initially we did not intend to focus on the emotional challenges of public wheelchair use, emotional dilemmas loomed large in our own and our informants' accounts and in the published accounts of other wheelchair users' public experiences. Gradually we became convinced that those dilemmas contained a revealing story about the place of wheelchair users in public life, about contemporary public life more generally, and about interpersonal processes of emotion management. The following analysis tells that story.

THE EMOTIONAL DEMANDS OF PUBLIC WHEELCHAIR USE

For many wheelchair users, the very decision to venture into public places is emotionally turbulent. The desire for autonomy and for the many pleasures that only public places offer collides with fears—among others, fear of moving past and among much larger vehicles. There is the fear of upsetting others that has kept one of our informants, who recently started using a wheelchair, from using it in restaurants.

> I think it's hard for people to eat food close to people who are ill. There's something about the process of eating that makes people even more uptight about disease. . . . My rolling in probably wouldn't affect people in that way, but in the back of my mind I'm afraid it would. I'll have to get over that.

Wheelchair users also fear, with justification, being an embarrassing and embarrassed public spectacle.

Humoring Embarrassment

Like those whom one of our informant calls "stand-up people," wheelchair users face a variety of embarrassing possibilities whenever they venture into public places. For any number of familiar reasons, they may lose control over self or situation (Gross and Stone 1964), falling short of what is generally expected of competent public actors. Wheelchair users, however, face a number of uniquely embarrassing contingencies because the physical environment, both natural and constructed, is unfriendly to their mode of mobility. Rain and snow can leave them immobile and embarrassingly in need of rescue. Doorway thresholds, uneven sidewalks, and unanticipated depressions at the bottom of curb cuts may cause a wheelchair to tip over, leaving its occupant embarrassingly sprawled on the ground. Crowded and narrow passageways may make it nearly impossible for wheelchair users to avoid knocking merchandise off shelves, rolling into standing strangers, or struggling to maneuver around tight corners in front of anxiously paralyzed bystanders. Although wheelchair users do not welcome such discomfort, many become quite adept at easing the "disease" (Gross and Stone 1964:2) of potentially embarrassing situations because they face them so often.

Humor is the most common and perhaps most effective strategy that wheelchair users employ for this purpose. As Goffman [1956] 1982: 112, note 10) suggests, laughing at or joking about embarrassing events reduces

[1] We met our informants through a variety of personal contacts. Two were committed activists in the disability rights movement; two others were more reluctant activists; the rest were not active. Eight had bachelor's degrees; two of these had postgraduate degrees. Six had never been married, two were widowed, and four were currently married, including three of the men and one woman. Their mean age was 39.7 years; the mean length of their public use of wheelchairs was 13.1 years.

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their seriousness and thereby lessens potentially embarrassing concern about them. Laughter and humor are also means of allaying anxiety (Coser 1959:174), which can serve a dual definitional purpose. A wheelchair user's potentially embarrassing situation often provokes anxiety in witnesses to her or his plight. Defining the situation as laughable can ease everyone's particular "dis-ease," as the second author learned when shopping at a clothing store.

> I wheeled up to the entrance to a dressing room while my friend held a number of garments. I forgot to set the brakes on my chair, so when I started to raise myself up with my crutches the chair went rolling backwards while I went falling forward onto the floor. My friend stood there with this look of alarm until I started laughing. The two of us started laughing, and then a saleswoman came rushing over: "My goodness, are you all right?" I answered "Yes, I'm fine" while still laughing. Her facial expression went from alarm to unconcern in a flash, once she realized we were laughing.

Through incidents like this, wheelchair users acquire the experiential wisdom that a sense of humor is "a tremendous asset":

> . . .if you can laugh at yourself, no matter what. . . . And if it's funny to me first, then my feelings aren't hurt. And you don't feel self-conscious because you can laugh with me.

As this 60-year-old woman had learned from countless falls in public places, laughter can both prevent and relieve hurt feelings, anxious self-consciousness, and the contagious "dis-ease" of embarrassment.

On the other hand, humor sometimes has the opposite effect. A woman who had been using a wheelchair in public for only six months told us of her recent experience in a shopping mall bathroom:

> There was a whole line of people waiting to get into these two stalls. It was packed. And I'm trying to back up and not doing a very good job of it and having to start over again, bumping into the washbasin. I finally get myself around, with all these people obviously watching me. There was dead silence. So I finally got myself out, and I looked up at all these people and I went "Now, I would like a big round of applause, please." Nobody did anything. It was like you can't make a joke about this stuff. I thought "Give me a break."

Like hospital patients who joke with the medical staff about death (Emerson 1969), this woman apparently exceeded the topical limits of her audience's sense of humor. At least they blatantly refused her invitation to laugh at her plight and reduce its definitional seriousness (Coser 1959:172). This incident illustrates one of the emotional dilemmas that wheelchair users face when in public places: they must attempt to remain poised and good-humored in frustrating and potentially embarrassing circumstances without thereby increasing others' already considerable discomfort at those circumstances. In public places they often have the double duty of managing both their own and others' emotions (Hochschild 1979).

Wheelchair users commonly assume this double duty when the recipients of young children's incivil attentions as often they are. On one occasion, for example, one of our informants drove us to a shopping mall in her van. We were all using wheelchairs and had to take turns using the power lift to exit the van. As we were doing so, a girl approximately four years old, whose hand was being held by a young woman, approached.

> The girl stared in awe while the young woman pulled her by the hand and studiously avoided glancing in our direction. We just as studiously avoided glancing in their direction. As they passed us, the girl loudly asked: "Mommy, what's wrong with those people? What's wrong with those people?" The girl's mother quickened their collective pace and did not reply until well out of the range of our hearing.

Although the tactic of "tactful blindness" (Goffman [1955] 1982:18) served us well in this instance, wheelchair users often do not find it so easy to ignore young children's incivil attentions.

This is clearly the case when wheelchair users are interrogated by curious children, as often happens, about their unusual mode of mobility and physical condition. All but one of our informants report that they gladly answer such young interrogators' questions. One informant, whose left leg had been amputated, had an uncommon sense of humor, but his openness with young children was not unusual.

> Kids go "Where's your leg?" "It's gone. If you find it, I'll give you fifty cents. I've been looking for that damn thing all week." "Can I see it?" "Sure." I take my pants up, show the stump. "Wow, it's gone. You're not sitting on it." "Yep, it's gone." They're frank. They're very candid.

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Inquisitive children's accompanying adult caretakers, however, seldom appreciate their young charges' candor. As the man quoted above reported, "The parents turn blue. They turn shades of pink and red. I have to protect the kids from the parents. They want to jerk them away." Other informants reported similar experiences.

> And children, you find that they come up and ask "How come you're in that chair? You mean you can't walk? Really?" But if there's an adult with them, they tend to pull the child back. "Oh now, don't disturb her." And I say "They're not disturbing me."

If our informants are at all representative, most wheelchair users not only graciously endure and satisfy young children's incivil curiosity when in public places. They also attempt to manage the embarrassment and (sometimes the wrath) of those curious children's adult caretakers in the interest of child protection. Whatever emotion work (Hochschild 1979: 561–63) is done is usually done by them.

Fred Davis (1961:127) once observed that "in our society the visibly handicapped are customarily accorded, save by children, the surface acceptance that democratic manners guarantee to nearly all." He may have been right about children, but many wheelchair users probably would find his attribution of democratic manners to children's elders a bit too generous. In both our own and our informants' experience, most adults indeed accord wheelchair users the surface acceptance of civil inattention in public places (Goffman 1963:84). Yet there are more than a few exceptions. These include walkers, as they are sometimes called by wheelchair users, who proclaim their admiration of a wheelchair user at the expense of his or her right to be let alone when in public (Goffman 1971:62). The older the walker and the younger the wheelchair user, the more common this treatment seems. The second author, for example, who is in her early twenties, is routinely approached by considerably older strangers, who cheerfully inform her that they think she "is wonderful." Although clearly complimentary, such unexpected and seemingly groundless public praise is an embarrassment. Simultaneously flattered, embarrassed, and resentful of the intrusion, the wheelchair user faces the dilemma of formulating an appropriate response, and usually settles for a half-hearted "thank you."

Wheelchair users commonly resolve the emotional dilemmas of their public lives in this way. They expressively mask their own emotions so as to manage others'. They cover their embarrassment with good humor, relieving witnesses' emotional discomfort. They hide resentment behind calm graciousness, saving forward strangers the embarrassment that would be caused by expressing such resentment. Even when wheelchair users feel fully justified in their emotional reactions, their public expression often contrasts sharply with their private feelings. The example of righteous anger suggests some reasons why.

Embarrassing Anger

Like children (Cahill 1990), wheelchair users are alternately treated like "open persons" (Goffman 1963a:126) and subjected to "nonperson" treatment in public places (Goffman 1963a:84). Although both forms of treatment betray others' surface acceptance of wheelchair users, the latter is usually more maddening. Occupants of various service roles are the culprits mentioned most often. Apparently uncomfortable salesclerks may busy themselves folding merchandise as if a potential customer in a wheelchair were invisible. Restaurant personnel may huddle behind a wheelchair user, close enough to let her overhear their discussion of "where to put her." All kinds of service workers may treat a wheelchair user's walking companions as his or her spokespersons and caretakers. Sometimes they return change to such companions after receiving payment from the wheelchair user, or ask her companions "And what would she like?"

Such nonperson treatment often provokes wheelchair users' anger but seldom the expression of that anger. As one of our informants told us, "I just want to reach out and grab a hold of them and shake them for all they're worth. But I just sit back, and I grit my teeth." Our informants report that they usually try to respond to nonperson treatment not with anger but with calm reminders of their presence and ability to speak for themselves. They also report that this strategy is usually effective in eliciting an embarrassed apology and more civil treatment.

Yet no matter how common and how effective such gentle reminders are, wheel-

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chair users sometimes reveal their anger at nonperson treatment through hostile comments and tone. When a waiter asked the wife of one of our informants whether "he will be getting out of the chair," our informant sarcastically replied "Yes, *he* will." Such hostile expressions can be even more effective than calm reminders in eliciting embarrassed apologies, but at the expense of leaving the wheelchair user feeling embarrassed and guilty about his or her lack of emotional poise. In this respect and most others, wheelchair users are as much children of their emotional culture (Gordon 1990:146) as are most other contemporary Americans. To borrow a distinction from Hochschild (1990:122–24), our "feeling rules" sometimes prescribe anger but our "expression rules" proscribe its expression. These contradictions lead to conflicting feelings of justifiable anger and guilt at expressing the anger. Wheelchair users are not alone in experiencing such contradictory feelings in public or elsewhere.

Private guilt and embarrassment are not the only potentially unwelcome consequences of wheelchair users' public expressions of anger. Rather than eliciting embarrassed apologies, their anger may be returned, as one of our informants learned when she protested a robustly walking man's choice of parking places.

> I've had a guy park in a handicapped parking spot, and I've gone up and said: "Look, do you realize you're parked in a handicapped parking spot?" And he said "I know it, and I'm sick of you people getting all the good spots. It's reverse discrimination. I'm sick of being discriminated against." "Well," I said, "I'm going to call the police and you can tell your story to them." And he says, "Go ahead. I've had it. It's about time."

Although this man moved his car when our informant wheeled to the nearest public telephone, it was a harder-won moral victory than she had anticipated. As Zola (1982:223) observes, wheelchair users who publicly express moral outrage at their treatment must be prepared to receive what they give. Their angry protest may be met with angry resistance, creating an embarrassing and sometimes alarming public scene that they must then manage or escape.

The angry protests by self-appointed defenders of wheelchair users' public privileges are no less instructive in this regard. One of our informants, who drove a car with hand controls that was otherwise unremarkable, told us of the following public encounter:

> I pull the car into a handicapped place, and this car pulls up alongside me with two young women in it. One of them leans over and says, "You know you're in a handicapped place." And I said, "Yes, I'm disabled." And then she says "You don't look disabled." And I don't usually do this kind of thing, but I just said "What does disabled look like?" And they just drove off. Maybe I shouldn't have done that, but it was one of those days.

The informant's hostile retort and the tinge of guilt he apparently felt as a result illustrate both the possible subjective costs and the interpersonal risks of publicly expressing anger. This is one horn of an emotional dilemma that wheelchair users often face in public. Should they suppress their righteous anger and forgo the satisfaction that its expression often brings, or should they assume the costs and risks of expression? As suggested previously, our informants, like the second author, commonly resolve this dilemma in favor of suppression—if not of their anger, then at least of expression.

That decision, however, does not always save wheelchair users from the embarrassing public scenes that angry protests can create. Their walking companions see to that, as a 34-year-old paraplegic woman explains.

> After thirteen and a half years you've heard just about everything, so it's like "Oh, you know." But it's my friends who [say] "Can you imagine the nerve? Let's get out of here." they've actually made me leave. My ex-boyfriend, we got up from the table and walked out . . . it started when they didn't know where to put me, and then the waitress ignored me. And he had just had it. He said "We're out of here." I said "Don't make an issue out of it." "The issue's made." Got my purse, got my coat, and we started to leave. We had the manager on our coattails. I think that's more embarrassing.

As Goffman (1963b:31) observes, "[T]he person with a courtesy stigma can in fact make both the stigmatized and the normal uncomfortable" by confronting everyone "with too much morality." Walkers who befriend and accompany wheelchair users in public are apparently no exception. Their easy susceptibility to moral outrage may lead to public scenes that their wheelchair-using companions would just as soon avoid. As if

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their occasional nonperson treatment were not painful enough, wheelchair users also must sometimes bear the embarrassment of their defenders' self-righteous zeal.

Wheelchair users' experiences with public anger are not unique. Regardless of our mode of mobility, public expressions of anger are risky: they can provoke angry retaliation and create embarrassing scenes. For most of us, much of the time, those potential costs seem to outweigh whatever personal satisfaction we might gain by expressing our righteous rage. Consequently we "surface act" (Hochschild 1979: 558) so as to prevent our anger from reaching the surface. Thus, public appearances of emotional indifference are sometimes just that—appearances. Wheelchair users' experiences in public places remind us of how much emotion work may be invested in maintaining those appearances.

Ingratiating Sympathy

Prevailing expression rules, possible retaliation, and potential embarrassment are not the only deterrents to wheelchair users' public expression of righteous anger. They also know that they cannot afford to alienate the walkers who populate the public places they frequent. Experience has taught them that their uncooperative bodies and, more commonly, the unfriendliness of the physical environment to their mode of mobility sometimes leave them hopelessly dependent on others' sympathetic assistance. They may need waiters to move chairs away from a table so that they can wheel their own under it, or to store their wheelchair after transferring to a chair with legs. Often they must rely on strangers to fetch items from shelves that are either too high or too low for them to reach. They may wheel down a curb cut on one side of a street only to find a curb on the other side, over which anonymous passersby must help them if they are to continue along their intended path. Like one of our informants, they may find themselves in a restaurant or bar without "handicap accessible" toilet facilities and themselves without same-sexed companionship, and thus may require the assistance of total strangers to use those much-needed facilities. Or, like another of our informants, they may need to flag down a passing motorist on a city street to help them replace a foot on the footrest of their wheelchair after it has been dislodged by an involuntary spasm. These are only a few of the circumstances in which wheelchair users find themselves requiring the sympathetic assistance of walkers with whom they are unacquainted (Cahill and Eggleston 1993).

Whatever its form, that assistance qualifies as sympathetic. According to Clark (1987: 296), sympathy consists of "empathy plus sentiment, empathy plus display or all three." The assistance that walkers sometimes provide wheelchair users in public places has at least two of those components. It involves empathetic role-taking and is a culturally recognized expression of sympathy, even if not motivated by sincere "fellow-feeling" or sentiment. Regardless of the motivation, its provision stirs emotions.

Although many wheelchair users do not hesitate to ask for assistance when they need it, they are as aware of, and as strongly committed to, prevailing sympathy etiquette (Clark 1987) as other rules of feeling and expression. Therefore they often find themselves torn between concern about making excessive claims on others' sympathy and their immediate need for sympathetic assistance. Guilt is the typical result.

> If I'm in the grocery store, and I need something, and I ask somebody to get it [I say] "Oh, I'm sorry." And I find myself making excuses, saying things like "Oh, it's just not been my day" or "it seems everything I want today is up too high." I feel like I'm putting people out of their way. I feel like I'm imposing on someone to ask for help.

This informant told us that she did not have to apologize or explain herself because "people would bend over backwards to help you," but she seemed implicitly to know better. Even while she laid claim to others' sympathy, her apologies and accounts demonstrated her awareness of sympathy etiquette and its proscription against excessive claims (Clark 1987: 305–307). Her guilty penance of remedial work (Goffman 1971: 108–18) may have assured her benefactors that she would claim no more of their sympathy, time, and attention than necessary.

This wheelchair user's sensitivity to the sacrifices of sympathetically helpful strangers is not unusual. Wheelchair users often are forced to request sympathetic assistance from strangers in order to continue on their daily rounds, but still feel a pang of guilt when doing so. Those who have some choice may

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feel somewhat more than a guilty pang, as the first author learned when using a wheelchair in public places. Wherever someone opened a door or performed some other minor service, this author felt like a shameless fraud who was exploiting strangers' kindness. One of our informants, who could walk short distances with the aid of a cane, often experienced similar feelings:

> I've had people do double and triple takes when I get up out of my wheelchair. . . . Sometimes when I'm using my chair in a grocery store and I can't reach something, I get up; sometimes I ask people to get it for me. I mean, that's where I feel like a fraud, because I can get up. But if I get up, then I feel like a fraud because people can tell that I'm using a wheelchair but I don't need to—I mean, I don't *have* to.

Like this woman, many wheelchair users are aware that they must appear strong, independent, and brave so as to avoid "being perceived as self-pitying" and overdemanding of others' sympathy (Clark 1987: 307).[2] To avoid such a perception and the resulting guilt, they may take needless risks and expend needless energy rather than requesting even minor aid from strangers. The micropolitical benefits of such dogged self-reliance may also help to compensate for inefficient expenditures of time, energy, and personal safety.

Even if wheelchair users defiantly refuse to pay the subjective price of guilt when requesting and accepting sympathetic assistance, they pay an interpersonal price. Whatever the benefits, as Clark (1987:299–300) observes, receiving sympathy obligates the recipient to repay the granter with "emotional commodities such as gratitude, deference and future sympathy." And deferential gratitude is the only emotional currency with which wheelchair users can repay gifts of sympathetic assistance from strangers whom they are unlikely to encounter in the future. Using such currency to compensate helpful and sympathetic strangers for their sacrifices is not without micropolitical implications: wheelchair users thereby elevate their benefactors' interactional standing or "place" at the expense of their own (Clark 1990).

Wheelchair users often pay that price cheerfully when they require and request sympathetic assistance, but those are not the only occasions on which they are expected to pay it. Walkers who are unknown to wheelchair users provide sympathetic assistance not only when it is requested, but also when it is not. The first author learned this in the opening moments of his first public appearance in a wheelchair.

> I got the chair unfolded and assembled and started wheeling down the hallway. As I was approaching the door, a woman walked alongside my chair and asked: "Are you going that way?" Assuming that she meant toward the door, I answered "Yes." She gracefully moved in front of me and opened the first of the double doors. I thanked her. She then just as gracefully opened the outer door once I was through the first, and again I thanked her.

From all reports, this is not an unusual experience for wheelchair users. Walkers often quicken or slow their pace so as to be in a position to open and hold doors for wheelchair users whom they do not know. They offer to push occupied wheelchairs up steep inclines, and sometimes begin to do so without warning. Also, they volunteer to fold and load wheelchairs into their users' cars and vans. These are only a few examples of the unsolicited assistance that wheelchair users report receiving from strangers in public places. In the words of Andre Dubus (1991:144), whose left leg was amputated after a traffic accident, "again and again, for nearly two years, my body has drawn sudden tenderness from men and women I have seen for only those moments in their lives when they helped me with their hands or their whole bodies." Such tenderness and help have a price, however.

Unsolicited acts of sympathetic assistance place wheelchair users under no less of obligation than acts that are requested. It is still generally expected that the recipient will repay the granter with "deferential gratitude," and the micropolitical cost of that repayment may be even greater than for requested acts of sympathetic assistance. Simmel offers a theoretical explanation:

> Once we have received something good from another person . . . we no longer can make up for it completely. The reason is that his gift,

[2] Zola (1982:233) argues that "just because an individual *can* do something physical does not mean that he *should*," but our sympathy etiquette argues otherwise. It proscribes accepting sympathy too readily, and thereby prescribes implicitly that individuals do everything they physically *can* before imposing on others' sympathy. For persons with disabilities, feeling rules can be not only an emotional burden but physical as well.

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> because it was first, has a voluntary character which no return gift can have (1950:392).

This voluntary character is absent from the provision of sympathetic assistance in response to a request from an apparently "sympathy worthy" (Clark 1987:297–98) wheelchair user. If the provision of the requested assistance is of little moment to the person asked, as is commonly the case, then provision is no less obligatory than repayment. To refuse such a request is to risk being judged hatefully heartless. In contrast, an unsolicited act of sympathetic assistance contains what Simmel (1950:393) calls "the decisive element of . . . freedom," which is absent from the deferential gratitude offered in return. Moreover, as Clark (1990:315) observes, the donor of an emotional gift such as sympathetic assistance "gets to impose his or her definition of what the other wants or needs." To accept such an emotional gift is not only to "contract an irredeemable obligation" (Simmel 1950:393) but also to concede definitional authority over one's own wants and needs to another, thus doubly diminishing the recipient's interactional standing. Thus the micropolitical implications of the kindness often displayed toward wheelchair users in public places can be quite unkind.

This is not to say that wheelchair users never appreciate unsolicited offers and acts of sympathetic assistance. One of our informants reports that he adjusts the speed of his wheelchair in relation to the reflections of approaching walkers in glass doors so as to ensure that they will reach the door slightly before him and will open and hold it for him voluntarily. At times he is more than willing to absorb the micropolitical losses caused by accepting such a minor expression of sympathetic kindness, and he is not alone.

Yet neither he nor other wheelchair users appreciate all the unsolicited assistance that sympathetic walkers shower on them. Sometimes they resent the costs in definitional authority or in mere time and energy that such acts of kindness impose. In the 1970s, for example, one of our informants was mistaken for a wounded veteran of the Vietnam war by a bouncer at a popular country and western bar. Before our informant could correct the misidentification, the bouncer carried him and his chair past the long queue of people awaiting admittance to the bar, forcibly removed some patrons from a table, and then offered the table to our informant and his companions. When the bouncer left to order "drinks on the house," our informant's wife wisely advised him, "Don't you dare tell him you're not a vet." For the rest of the evening, our informant and his companions were held hostage to the bouncer's definition of the situation, and had to feign knowledge of Vietnamese geography. Another informant reports that bartenders routinely refuse to accept payment for his drinks, insisting that his "money's no good here." A relatively well-paid civil servant, our informant resented the definitional implication that he was unable to pay his own way, but sometimes "let it go because they just wouldn't take my money." At times, too, unsolicited assistance merely makes wheelchair users' lives more difficult, as when walkers insist on helping a wheelchair user disassemble, fold, and load the wheelchair into a car or van, taking twice as long to do so as the user commonly takes and sometimes damaging the wheelchair in the process.

Even more maddening are those occasions on which self-appointed benefactors bear some responsibility for the wheelchair user's plight. One of our informants reported that she called a restaurant to inquire if it was accessible to wheelchair users. After being assured that it was, she made reservations for the following evening.

> [W]e got there only to find that they had four or five steps, and there was no way I was going to get up there. So the owner of the restaurant and several of the male kitchen help came out and just picked my chair right up. They made every effort, once I got there, to help, which was really nice, but at the same time I was not happy after what they'd told me . . . I get embarrassed when people make too much fuss over me.

This embarrassed and unhappy, if not angry, woman never returned to the restaurant in question. Yet on the evening of her first and only visit, she graciously thanked its owner and his employees for helping her over, through, and out of a predicament into which he had lured her. Her apparently insincere expression of seemingly undeserved gratitude is not aberrant among wheelchair users who receive unsolicited and unwelcome acts of sympathetic assistance. Here again, wheelchair users' public expression and their private feelings often contrast sharply.

At least our informants often express

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gratitude for unsolicited offers and acts of assistance even when they are unneeded, unwelcome, inconvenient, embarrassing, and demeaning. They know all too well the consequences of not doing so: their self-appointed benefactors, as well as those who witness his or her charity, are likely to judge them harshly for any hint of ingratitude. One of our informants learned this on his first trip to a highly recommended barbershop.

> I drove over there and got out of my car and wheeled my wheelchair up to the door. I opened the door and prepared to go in, and one of the two barbers came out and grabbed my handles. Now, as I've said, I like to do and insist on doing things for myself, but this fellow would not let go of the handles. I had my brakes on, preventing him from pushing me, but he insisted that he was going to push me over the threshold. . . . And finally . . . I forget what he said, but I asked for an apology. And he said "Okay, I apologize, but you have a chip on your shoulder, don't you?"

Like recipients of other forms of charity, wheelchair users who refuse or resist unsolicited acts of sympathetic assistance risk being viewed as having what Stein (1989) calls "an attitude" or "a chip on their shoulders." For many wheelchair users on many occasions, thankful and deferential acceptance of such charitable acts may seem less micropolitically costly than being judged ungrateful, testy, and uncivil.

Even when wheelchair users are willing to pay the price of such harsh judgments rather than cooperating in diminishing their interactional place, another consideration often prevents them from doing so. As Goffman (1963:113) observes, the treatment of those who bear a stigma conveys to them that their "real group," the one whose interests they must champion, "is the aggregate of persons who are likely to have to suffer the same deprivations as [they suffer] because of having the same stigma." Wheelchair users are no exception, and many take this lesson to heart. Therefore they feel a sense of responsibility toward other wheelchair users and worry that their example might influence how other wheelchair users are treated in the future.

> I have people falling all over themselves trying to help me. It used to bother me, but, god, the older you get the less it does. But I know a lot of people it does. I've got one friend that's at the point of almost being rude. This is bad because it sets a bad example. That person in the future may not be quite so willing to help the next person who really needs it.

As in this woman's case but not her friend's, the contradiction between a wheelchair user's immediate micropolitical interests and the presumably greater interests of his or her "real group" often blocks the wheelchair user's expression of his or her subjective emotional reactions to unsolicited and unwelcome offers and acts of assistance. He or she consequently sacrifices interactional place for the presumably greater good of those who share the stigma of moving through public places in a sitting position.

THE WAGES OF PUBLIC ACCEPTANCE

As late as the early 1970s, persons with visible disabilities were legally banned from public places in a number of American cities (Kleinfield 1977: 34–35). Today wheelchair users are a common presence in public places, attracting only occasional stares and many minor acts of public aid (Gardner 1986). Yet, the surface acceptance and assistance that others commonly grant them are not without a price.

Wheelchair users are at least as different as the walkers whom they encounter in public. Like a number of our informants, some have no visible disability apart from their wheelchair use. Like other of our informants, some have amputated or apparently atrophied limbs, slurred speech, and obvious difficulty controlling their limb, neck, and facial muscles. Although walkers undoubtedly treat wheelchair users with visibly different disabilities differently, our diverse informants' reports of their public treatment, as well as the autobiographical reports that we read, were remarkably similar.

According to those reports, wheelchair users still must endure being treated like children in public places. Sometimes they are treated as open persons who can be addressed at will about their condition and the technical means of their mobility. At other times they are discussed and talked past as if absent. Robert Murphy (1987:201) suggests that people with disabilities are treated like children in part because "overdependency and nonreciprocity are considered childish traits,"[3] but wheelchair us-

[3] Along similar lines, Mead suggests that the "attitude

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ers seldom exhibit such traits in public. Although wheelchair users often depend on others' friendly assistance when the physical features of public places prove difficult to negotiate, most take pains to avoid exhausting the goodwill and sympathy of those who move through public places in a standing position. The above discussion demonstrates that wheelchair users more than reciprocate walkers for their assistance.

As in their relations with acquaintances (F. Davis 1961), wheelchair users commonly assume primary responsibility for alleviating whatever strain occurs in their public relations with strangers. In the preceding examination of wheelchair users' emotionally charged experiences in public places, we illustrated some of the ways in which they do so. They laughingly make themselves butts of jokes so as to ease others' anxious discomfort with the wheelchair users' own potentially embarrassing plight. They are tactfully blind to young children's intrusive stares, tactfully deaf to such children's tactless remarks, and responsive to young interrogators' questions. Their poised example in such circumstances often counteracts the embarrassed "dis-ease" and sometimes anger of these children's adult caretakers, to the benefit of all concerned. Wheelchair users may remain poised even in the face of nonperson treatment, and may attempt to calm their companions' moral outrage. Thus they prevent embarrassing scenes that would engulf not only the guilty and the wronged but innocent bystanders as well. Again, when wheelchair users must impose on strangers' sympathy for minor acts of public aid, they often reciprocate with overgenerous remedial offerings and deferential gratitude. They may even accept unneeded and unwanted assistance with a gracious smile and hearty thanks so as not to offend their self-appointed benefactors or discourage them from assisting others in the future. In most of these cases, wheelchair users suppress the expression of their private feelings so as not to provoke or hurt others' feelings. Sometimes they also lower their interactional standing in the process.

Thus wheelchair users more than reciprocate the public acceptance and assistance that others grant them with considerable emotion work and micropolitical sacrifices. That work and those sacrifices profit the walkers whom they encounter in public. As Goffman (1963b:121) suggests, wheelchair users' public poise, even temper, and good humor, ensure that walkers "will not have to admit to themselves how limited their tactfulness and tolerance is." On the contrary, wheelchair users' request for and acceptance of public aid provides walkers with an opportunity to demonstrate to themselves, if not to others, that they are kind and caring people. The wheelchair users' common expressions of gratitude confirm that self-congratulatory moral identity (Stein 1989:245). As some of our informants' comments indicate, they are keenly aware of the public favors that they do for helpful walkers.

> I just resign myself to the fact that people like to help you. They really get a joy out of it. You can see it in their faces. I say hey, if they're willing to help regardless of how it hurts, let them. Let them help. They think they're doing me a favor. People are always running over, and I let them. They seem happy. It makes them feel good.

Perhaps walkers who "vent good works" upon wheelchair users are "just trying to help," but, in the words of a British woman who uses a wheelchair (Campling 1981:49), "whom they are actually helping is a supposition in need of analysis." The preceding discussion suggests that they are helping themselves to a favorable moral identity, often at the expense of wheelchair users' comfort, privacy, time, and micropolitical place. It is an open question whether walkers help wheelchair users as much in public places as wheelchair users help them.

Perhaps wheelchair users who frequent public places still are sometimes treated as children because the attention-attracting assistance they sometimes must request, but more often receive, overshadows all the interactional and identificatory assistance they give others. Yet one can easily discern wheelchair users' efforts and sacrifices on others' behalf by looking beyond the glare of physical feats and into the emotional and micropolitical shadows of public encounters. In those shadows wheelchair users stand tall, supporting the emotional weight of public tranquility and their public benefactors' moral identities.

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of giving [sympathetic] assistance in varied ways to others gets its striking exercise in relation to children. Helplessness in any form reduces us to children, and arouses the parental response in the other members of the community to which we belong" ([1934]1962:366).

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PUBLIC LIFE AND EMOTION MANAGEMENT

More general lessons await students of social life in the emotional and micropolitical shadows to which wheelchair users' public experiences lead. Strangers in public places may appear to be acting "almost subliminally, demanding nothing of each other" (Strauss 1961:63–64), but much is demanded of them. Contemporary public life rests on an implicit "social bargain" (Lofland 1971), as documented by Goffman (1963a, 1971) and those whom he influenced and inspired (e.g., Cahill 1987; Lofland 1973). Strangers in public places devote considerable energy to preserving their own and one another's privacy, anonymity, and socially valued identities. What has been neglected is the emotional effort that this entails. Wheelchair users' public experiences suggest that this effort is not insignificant.

Wheelchair users are not the only ones who manage both their own and others' emotions in public places. Walkers who encounter wheelchair users in public undoubtedly sometimes avoid expressing their own private anxieties, aversion, admiration, or sympathetic concern out of concern for the wheelchair users' feelings. It is also doubtful that public encounters between unacquainted walkers and wheelchair users are unusual in this respect. Our public etiquette would seem to proscribe the public expression of emotions that are prescribed by our feeling rules, and public life is often emotionally provocative. Although strangers in public places may take pains to avoid physical contact with one another, nonetheless they touch one another emotionally in a variety of ways. They are touched embarrassingly by one another's presumed judgments as well as by one another's embarrassment. They are caressed reassuringly by others' averted gaze and pinched with fear by others' stares. Others' slights and impositions touch them with anger, and they feel a touch of guilt over their own anger. They touch one another sympathetically when requesting and providing minor acts of public aid, and repay such gifts touchingly in a variety of emotional currencies.

Yet whatever our mode of public mobility, we commonly appear emotionally reserved in public places. We mask our own emotions so as not to excite others'. We manage our own expressions and thereby others' feelings. We surface act so as to sustain the tranquil exterior of public life and to avoid being swept away by its emotionally turbulent undercurrents. As suggested by the example of wheelchair users, this is part of the implicit social bargain of contemporary public life. It is the price of public acceptance, as illustrated dramatically by our reactions to the highly expressive outcasts who populate the public places of many American cities. It is a special characteristic of public anonymity that the very process of producing it socially gives it the appearance of being not only asocial but unemotional as well. Students of social life must look beyond those appearances in order to fully understand public bonds and the bindings of contemporary society. The example of wheelchair users suggests that these bindings include interpersonal processes of emotion management.

A fuller appreciation of these processes might bring another benefit as well. Students of social life now have successfully claimed the study of emotions as their own, but our long neglect is still evident. Like those who pursued this study in our absence, we continue to focus on the personal and subjective to the neglect of the interpersonal and intersubjective. To cite only one example, Hochschild's (1983) flight attendants managed their own emotions so as to manage those of their passengers, but we know far more about the attendants' management of their own emotions than about their management of the passengers'. Yet the social shaping of emotions is not limited to emotional socialization. Sometimes wittingly and often unwittingly, we shape one another's emotions moment by moment in the course of our everyday social lives. Perhaps the example of wheelchair users' emotionally charged lives in public will convince some students of social life that those intersubjective processes of emotion management deserve at least as much attention as the subjective processes on which we have concentrated until now.

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